

State's contingent jumps on House ownership bill

By Harlan Levy

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The bill to undo the new relaxed media ownership rules — approved Thursday by the Senate Commerce Committee in a voice vote — would reinstitute the cross-ownership ban on a single entity owning a newspaper and television station in the Hartford-New Haven market, according to a committee release.

Chicago-based Tribune Co., the national media giant that owns The Hartford Courant, WTIC-TV61, and WTXN-TV20, all in the Hartford-New Haven market, would have to divest either the Courant or at least one TV station if

the bill makes it into law.

Here's how members of Connecticut's congressional delegation who could be reached for comment responded:

Sen. Christopher J. Dodd, D-Ct., was a co-sponsor of the bill that reinstates the cross-ownership ruling.

"Senator Dodd believes the Commerce Committee absolutely did the right thing," said Dodd spokesman Marvin Fast. "The FCC's rule change is not good for consumers or good for our democracy."

Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman, D-Ct., said he "strongly" supports the bill and intends to co-sponsor it.

Rep. John B. Larson, D-1st District, is a co-sponsor of a House version of the Senate bill that would retain the rule mandating that a company not have an interest in broadcast stations that exceeds 35 percent of the national audience.

"It is difficult to judge at this point what provisions a House version of a similar bill would have," Larson spokesman Michael Kirk said, but "generally, the Congressman would be supportive of rules that protect small media markets, competition, market diversity, and local control, so he will obviously be supportive of a House bill that protects these needs."

Rep. Robert R. Simmons, R-2nd District, would not directly comment on the Senate bill, but he said he does not support the FCC's new rules. He is another co-sponsor of the House version of the Senate bill.

"Easing the current restrictions will further erode programming diversity and threaten local ownership in media as large news outlets are given the latitude to expand and swallow up smaller competitors," Simmons said. "Many media outlets are already owned by large, out-of-state conglomerates with little attachment to the communities their stations and newspapers cover. We do not need to exacerbate this by making it even easier for large media companies to buy out our

local sources of information and entertainment."

Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-3rd, did not comment on the bill. She is also a co-sponsor of the House version of the bill. When the FCC voted to relax the rules, she wrote to FCC Chairman Michael K. Powell, saying she was disappointed that the agency did not allow more time to analyze the effects and get more public opinion. The effects of the rule change "will be far-reaching, and could result in mergers and consolidations among companies that are already extremely powerful, reducing the number of diverse, independent voices on our airwaves," she wrote. "This decision is particularly unsettling due to the fact that the airwaves are already largely concentrated. Today, five conglomerates dominate the television news media. These companies own television networks and affiliates, radio stations, cable systems, Internet service providers and production companies and five of them control over two thirds of prime-time television programming. The FCC's decision ... is a blow to the First Amendment and a win for big corporations across America."

Rep. Christopher Shays, R-4th, does not support the Senate bill.

"While I can understand concerns about concentration of media ownership," he said, "I think the new rules adopted by the FCC strike an appropriate balance between the need to protect consumers and the need to update existing regulations. I do not think the Senate bill is necessary."

Rep. Nancy L. Johnson, R-5th District, is another co-sponsor of the House version of the Senate bill.

"She believes that a diverse array of media voices is necessary for a healthy democracy and vigorous public debate on the issues before us," Johnson's spokesman Brian Schubert said. "She believes H.R. 2052 would restore the diversity of ownership we need to foster a healthy and competitive media market."

Senate committee reviews FCC ruling

The Senate Commerce Committee approved Thursday the overturning of a June 2 ruling by the Federal Communications Commission that deregulated cross ownership of television with other media.

Percentage of market owned by the top 10 companies

Cable television

59.9 million subscribers



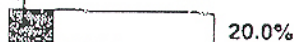
Television

310 television stations



Radio broadcasters

2,274 radio stations



Newspapers

29.1 million Sunday editions



All figures are for 2002 except newspaper circulations, which are for 1999.

SOURCES: The Center for Public Integrity; Audit Bureau of Circulations; BIA Financial Network; Newspaper Association of America

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